Love Poems

Love could possibly be the reason that poetry was invented. Nothing else in human experience is as powerful as our connection to the people we care about. Perhaps for this reason, nothing else in human experience is as difficult to capture in words.

Nevertheless, we keep trying. Poets and songwriters continually search for innovative ways to express love in all its complex variety. In this unit, we will look at two poets and one songwriter who found a way to put love into words.
Pablo Neruda

Biography

Pablo Neruda, born in 1904, is heralded as one of the most influential poets of the 20th century. A native of Chile, Neruda’s work encompasses various styles and themes, ranging from historical epics to passionate love poems. In 1971, Neruda was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He died in 1973.

Neruda’s Love Poems

Pablo Neruda’s love poems are famous for their exceptional depth, sensuality, and profound understanding of the complexities of the human heart. A defining aspect of his love poetry is its use of vivid imagery, often using nature as a powerful metaphor, linking the beauty and force of the natural world to the intensity of romantic feelings. In Neruda’s poetry, women (in both body and mind) are represented by nature.

His work also explores the following themes:

- Individuality, focussing on the uniqueness and irreplaceability of the loved one.
- Time and eternity, contemplating the enduring power of love against the impermanence of life.
- Longing and desire, articulating the profound physical and emotional feelings of romantic love.

“Every Day You Play” is written in blank verse (poetry with no end rhyme or consistent metric pattern). Nevertheless, the language and images reveal Neruda’s mastery of the poetic form.
Every Day You Play

Every day you play with the light of the universe.
Subtle visitor, you arrive in the flower and the water.
you are more than this white head that I hold tightly
as a bunch of flowers, every day, between my hands.

You are like nobody since I love you.
Let me spread you out among yellow garlands.
Who writes your name in letters of smoke among the stars of the south?
Oh let me remember you as you were before you existed.

Suddenly the wind howls and bangs at my shut window.
The sky is a net crammed with shadowy fish.
Here all the winds let go sooner or later, all of them.
The rain takes off her clothes.

The birds go by, fleeing.
The wind. The wind.
I can contend only against the power of men.
The storm whirls dark leaves
and turns loose all the boats that were moored last night to the sky.

You are here. Oh, you do not run away.
You will answer me to the last cry.
Cling to me as though you were frightened.
Even so, at one time a strange shadow ran through your eyes.

Now, now too, little one, you bring me honeysuckle,
and even your breasts smell of it.
While the sad wind goes slaughtering butterflies
I love you, and my happiness bites the plum of your mouth.
How you must have suffered getting accustomed to me,
my savage, solitary soul, my name that sends them all running.
So many times we have seen the morning star burn, kissing our eyes,
and over our heads the gray light unwind in turning fans.

My words rained over you, stroking you.
A long time I have loved the sunned mother-of-pearl of your body.
I go so far as to think that you own the universe.
I will bring you happy flowers from the mountains, bluebells,
dark hazels, and rustic baskets of kisses.
I want to do with you what spring does with the cherry trees.

Glossary:
• Crammed: Packed tightly; filled to capacity.
• Fleeing: Running away; escaping.
• Garlands: Wreaths or chains of flowers and leaves used for decoration.
• Honeysuckle: A type of extremely fragrant flower.
• Howls: Makes a loud, wailing sound, typically used to describe the sound of the wind.
• Moored: Securely anchored or tied up (referring to boats).
• Mother-of-pearl: A smooth, shiny substance that forms the inner layer of the shells of some mollusks.
• Plum: A sweet fruit with a smooth skin, or in this context, it could metaphorically refer to something highly desirable.
• Rustic: Characteristic of the countryside; simple or plain.
• Slaughtering: Killing or destroying in a brutal way.
• Solitary: Alone; without companions.
• Subtle: Delicate or precise, often difficult to analyze or describe.
• Unwind: To unravel or unfold.
• Whirls: Spins or rotates quickly.
• “You are more than this white head”: A metaphorical way to say that the person is more than just their physical appearance.
• “You do not run away”: Implying steadiness and constancy in the face of challenges.
William Shakespeare

Biography

William Shakespeare, born in April 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, is often regarded as one of the greatest playwrights and poets in the English language. In addition to his 39 plays, he wrote 154 sonnets and two narrative poems. Shakespeare’s works delved into the human psyche and explored universal themes such as love, power, and mortality. He is undoubtedly the most important writer in the history of the English language. He died in 1616.

Shakespeare’s Sonnets

Shakespeare’s sonnets are celebrated for exploring love in all its various forms, including the duality of love, portraying it as both a source of joy and pain. The sonnets also delve into the theme of time, examining how love can endure or change as time passes. Using complex wordplay and metaphors, he explores love and desire, often by pointing out the temporary nature of youth and beauty.

The sonnet is a poetic form with 14 lines, each line being ten syllables long. The lines are typically written in iambic pentameter, which means they have a rhythm where an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable, creating a da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM beat. The Shakespearean (or English) sonnet follows the ABAB-CDCD-EFEF-GG rhyme scheme. The final couplet “resolves” the poem’s meaning, explaining or interpreting the “lesson” of the sonnet.
Sonnet 18: Shall I Compare Thee...

Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer’s lease hath all too short a date;
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm’d;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature’s changing course untrimm’d;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st;
Nor shall death brag thou wander’st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st:
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Glossary:
- Art: (Thou art) You are.
- Complexion: The natural color, texture, and appearance of a person’s skin.
- Declines: Decreases, diminishes, or fades away.
- Fair: Beautiful; also refers to fairness and justice.
- Gold: Referring to the golden color, often associated with youth and beauty.
- “Nature’s changing course untrimmed”: The natural changes and aging process that lead to loss of beauty or vitality.
- “Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st”: Nor lose the beauty that you possess.
- “Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines”: Sometimes the sun (referred to as "the eye of heaven") is too hot.
- “Summer’s lease hath all too short a date”: The duration of summer is too short.
- Temperate: Mild, moderate, not extreme.
- Untrimmed: Not adorned or beautified; here it could refer to the loss of beauty or brilliance.
Joni Mitchell

Biography

Joni Mitchell, born in 1943 in Alberta, Canada, is a prolific singer-songwriter, famous for her profound impact on the music of the 20th century. Mitchell's music spans various genres, including folk, rock, pop, and jazz, showcasing her versatility as an artist. Mitchell's work is noted for its introspective and autobiographical nature, exploring themes such as love, social justice, and personal reflection. Mitchell has won multiple Grammy Awards, and she was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1997.

Lyrical Style

Joni Mitchell's lyrical style is distinguished by its poetic nature, and her songs are often described as works of literature rather than mere popular music. Her lyrics frequently employ vivid imagery and metaphor, creating rich visual landscapes and conveying complex emotions and ideas. Mitchell is also known for her introspective and personal approach to songwriting, using her music as a means to explore and articulate her own experiences.

Mitchell’s song “Both Sides, Now,” from her 1969 album Clouds, is frequently listed as one of the best songs ever written. Also, for some reason, many people find it difficult to listen to the song without crying. It is written in trochaic tetrameter, which means each line typically consists of four stressed-unstressed pairs (trochees). This gives the song a rhythmic "DA-da DA-da DA-da DA-da" feel. The verses have an AAAB rhyming pattern, but the chorus switches to AABB.
Both Sides, Now

Rows and flows of angel hair
And ice cream castles in the air
And feather canyons everywhere
I've looked at clouds that way

But now they only block the sun
They rain and snow on everyone
So many things I would have done
But clouds got in my way

I've looked at clouds from both sides now
From up and down and still somehow
It's cloud illusions I recall
I really don't know clouds at all

Moons and Junes and Ferris wheels
The dizzy dancing way that you feel
As every fairy tale comes real
I've looked at love that way

But now it's just another show
And you leave 'em laughing when you go

And if you care, don't let them know
Don't give yourself away

I've looked at love from both sides now
From give and take and still somehow
It's love's illusions that I recall
I really don't know love at all

Tears and fears and feeling proud
To say, "I love you" right out loud
Dreams and schemes and circus crowds
I've looked at life that way

Oh, but now old friends they're acting strange
They shake their heads and say I've changed
Well, something's lost, but something's gained
In living every day

I've looked at life from both sides now
From win and lose and still somehow
It's life's illusions I recall
I really don't know life at all

Listen to Joni Mitchell sing “Both Sides, Now.”
Thinking About It

Refer to the text above and the lecture notes from class to complete ONE of the following activities: You may choose to answer the three discussion questions OR write a poem. You don’t need to do both (but you can if you really want to). Use your own creative and specific ideas (not AI or Internet resources). Use the QR code on the right to submit your answers.

Discussion Questions

1. As discussed above, Pablo Neruda’s poetry often uses images from nature to represent womanly qualities. Look at the “cherry tree” image from the last line of the poem “Every Day You Play.” What do you think the poet is saying through this image?

2. The final couplet of Shakespeare’s 18th Sonnet says: “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.” What does “this” refer to?

3. In “Both Sides, Now” Joni Mitchell talks about the good and the bad sides of her experiences, about how something wonderful, like love, can sometimes disappoint. Talk about a time when something you really wanted was less satisfying than expected.

OR

Writing Activity

Choose the style of one of the poets we have studied in this unit (Neruda’s blank verse, Shakespeare’s sonnet in iambic pentameter, or Mitchell’s quatrains in trochaic tetrameter) and write a poem about a person you love. Use vivid images and metaphors to describe your feelings for that person in a poem of at least 16 lines.